Five killed as quake jolts Bangladesh

DHAKA: At least five people, including a child, were killed and around 100 were injured when a magnitude 5.7 earthquake struck Bangladesh on Friday, the government said, with buildings damaged in many areas, including the densely populated capital Dhaka.

Tremors were felt in the eastern states of neighbouring India that border Bangladesh, but there were no immediate reports of major damage, authorities said.

Muhammad Yunus, the head of Bangladesh's interim government, said the injured included students from Dhaka University, factory workers in the city of Gazipur, and residents of Narsingdi, the epicenter of the earthquake. His statement gave no details of how the five died. Police said earlier that three people had been killed when the railing of a six-storey building collapsed during the earthquake.

Several of the injured taken to hospital from Narsingdi, about 40 km (25 miles) east of Dhaka, were in a critical condition, health adviser Nurjahan Begum said.

Dhaka residents rushed out of their homes as buildings shook and some makeshift structures collapsed, according to witnesses.

"We felt a strong jolt and buildings were shaking like trees," said resident Suman Rahman. "Staircases were jammed as people rushed down. Everyone was terrified, and children were crying." The fire department said some people had been injured when bricks and loose cement fell from buildings that were under construction.

"I have never felt such a tremor in my life. We were at the office when the furniture started shaking. We rushed down the stairs on the street and saw other people on the road already," said Sadman Sakib, who works in Dhaka. The government was closely monitoring the situation and had directed departments to intensify rescue operations in affected areas, Yunus' office said in the statement.—Reuters

Red Cross slashes budget, to shed 2,900 jobs

GENEVA: The International Committee of the Red Cross said Friday it was cutting its 2026 budget by 17 percent amid declining donor contributions and would slash thousands of jobs.

The ICRC said "a challenging financial environment in the humanitarian sector" had led its assembly to approve a 2026 budget of 1.8 billion Swiss francs ($2.2 billion) — down 17 percent compared to this year.

The organisation warned that the cuts come at a time when the number of conflicts worldwide and the need for aid are surging. "We face a dangerous convergence of escalating armed conflicts, significant cuts to aid funding and a systemic tolerance for grave breaches of international humanitarian law," ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric said in a statement.

"The ICRC remains committed to working on the front lines of conflict, where few others can operate," she insisted, warning, though, that "the financial reality is forcing us to make difficult decisions to ensure we can continue to deliver critical humanitarian assistance to those who need it most".

The cuts meant the organisation will need to reduce the equivalent of around 2,900 full-time positions around the world.

The announcement comes as the world grapples with a dramatic international aid funding crisis.—AFP

THE former Syrian embassy is seen behind locked gates in Washington.—AFP

COP30 deal under threat amid clash over fossil fuels

BELEM: The European Union warned on Friday that the UN climate talks could end without a deal as oil-producing nations were accused of blocking any mention of a roadmap to phase out fossil fuels.

After nearly two weeks of negotiations in the Amazonian city of Belem, the draft text unveiled by COP30 host Brazil made no mention of "fossil fuels" or the word "roadmap" that President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva had himself publicly supported.

"What is now on the table is unacceptable. And given that we're so far away from where we should be, it's unfortunate to say, but we're really facing a no-deal scenario," European Union climate commissioner Wopke Hoekstra told reporters.

More than 30 countries, including wealthy nations, emerging economies and small island states, had warned in a letter to Brazil that they would reject any deal that did not include a plan to move away from fossil fuels.

France's ecological transition minister, Monique Barbut, said oil-rich Russia and Saudi Arabia, along with coal producer India and "many" emerging countries, were blocking a deal on fossil fuels.

German Environment Minister Carsten Schneider said the latest draft "cannot remain as it is" and warned that "negotiations will be tough", with only hours to go before COP30 officially ends.

Colombia's Environment Minister Irene Velez Torres said COP30 "cannot end" without a fossil fuel roadmap.

"We have the moral responsibility to echo the people's demands for climate justice and for the elimination of fossil fuels," she said.

Consensus is needed among the nearly 200 nations at the UN climate talks to land an agreement.

Several NGOs also rejected the draft deal, with Greenpeace urging nations to send it back to the Brazilian chair for revisions.

"Hopes were raised by initial proposals for roadmaps both to end deforestation and fossil fuels... but these roadmaps have disappeared," said Greenpeace climate politics expert Tracy Carty.

Money fight

Divisions remain not just over fossil fuels but also trade measures and finance for poorer nations to adapt to climate change and move to a low-carbon future.

"The lack of finance from richer nations... remains an ongoing obstacle in these final days to securing bold and fair outcomes," Rachel Cleetus, senior policy director at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said.

Hoekstra said the EU was "willing to be ambitious on adaptation" but that "any language on finance should squarely be within the commitment reached last year" at COP29 in Baku, where developed nations agreed to provide $300 billion in annual climate finance by 2035.

The EU is also fighting resistance led by China and India to its "carbon tax" on imports such as steel, aluminum, cement and fertilisers — measures Britain and Canada are also preparing to adopt.

Bronwen Tucker, public finance lead at advocacy group Oil Change International, called the latest draft text "outrageous".

"The presidency has presented a shamefully weak text that fails to mention fossil fuels, fails to deliver accountability towards rich countries' finance obligations, and only makes vague promises on adaptation," Tucker said.

Negotiations toward a final outcome were delayed on Thursday when a fire torched a hole through the fabric ceiling of the COP30 venue, forcing a panicked evacuation.

Nineteen people were treated for smoke inhalation and two for anxiety attacks.

The venue reopened later on Thursday night.—AFP

Washington's abandoned embassies have stories to tell

WASHINGTON: In Washington's embassy district, years' worth of wildly overgrown vegetation outside an empty building was finally pruned away in September as the flag of Syria was raised.

The symbolic reopening of the compound after 11 years of closure serves as a reminder that several buildings in the area of Washington called Kalorama are in a state of sad abandonment, thanks to the violent jolts of world diplomacy.

Since the embassy of Afghanistan closed a few months after the Taliban returned to power in 2021, its mailbox outside has been filled with yellowing newspapers.

And not far away, weeds grow in the parking lot of a mansion that used to house the Russian trade delegation in Washington. The State Department ordered it closed in reprisal for Russia's alleged attempt to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election.

The Syrian Embassy was shut down by the US government in 2014 after three years of civil war. Now, in principle at least, it can reopen.

The Trump administration announced this on November 10 after a White House visit by Syria's new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, the formerly blacklisted Islamic State militant who led the ouster of Assad in late 2024.

Angry neighbours

But the building is in such bad shape it could take years to get it up and running again, former Syrian diplomat Bassam Barabandi said.

Barabandi left his post in 2013 after it emerged that he had secretly made passports for people opposed to the Assad regime.

He recalled that even back then, before he left, areas of the building had been partially condemned.

"So, just imagine," he said, of its state now.

Down the street, the overgrown hedges outside the abandoned ambassador's residence were sometimes trimmed by gardeners employed by wealthy neighbors irked by the unsightliness.

A utility company notice of gas being cut off still hangs from the front door knob.

A few buildings away, near a mansion owned by Barack and Michelle Obama, the embassy of Afghanistan stands.

"So one day it was there. The next day, it just was, it was gone," said US postal worker Trina Thompson, who has done rounds in the neighborhood for 25 years.

That was in March 2022, and then-deputy ambassador Abdul Hadi Nejrabi watched it all. It was he who handed the keys to the embassy back to the US government.

Kabul had fallen to the Taliban seven months earlier, and Hadi Nejrabi and his diplomatic colleagues represented a government that no longer existed.

Soon, their bank accounts were frozen and they were no longer paid.

29 buildings on State Dept list

The State Department lists 29 such buildings, which it is supposed to be looking after: three associated with Afghanistan, six with Venezuela, and 11 with Iran — these three countries have no relations with the United States now. But the list also features three buildings for China and six Russian ones.

The buildings now off limits to the Russians include consulates in San Francisco and Seattle, and a massive compound in Maryland.

They were closed in a spat of tit for tat reprisals after the 2016 election, won by Donald Trump.—AFP

Doha Film Festival opens with screening of *Voice of Hind Rajab*

By Irfan Aslam

DOHA: The Doha Film Festival opened with a bang with the screening of award-winning The Voice of Hind Rajab, a film covering a harrowing phone call made by a five-year-old Palestinian girl who was killed by Israeli fire in 2024 while trying to escape Gaza with her family.

Two months earlier, the film won the Silver Lion Grand Jury prize at the Venice Film Festival.

Hind's case sparked outrage across the world. The child was moving out of the danger zone with her uncle, aunt and cousins when their car was attacked. She miraculously survived long enough to make a frantic call to Red Crescent volunteers to get help but was eventually killed by Israeli fire.

The film, directed by Tunisian director Kaouther Ben Hania, dramatised the actual events, but featured Hind's real voice. The entire conversation that the child had during her phone call with the volunteers of the Red Crescent Society has been included in the film.

It also features dramatised scenes inside the Red Crescent Society office, as volunteers spoke to the girl. Though the actors perfected their craft, the most impactful for the audience was the voice of the pleading child.

Her pleas echoed those of the many other Palestinian children, calling on the world to take notice of their flight. As the audience listens to her voice on the phone call, they can hear gunfire by Israeli tanks as well.

At the opening of the film, Hind's mother said, "Since the passing of Hind, I continue to look for my daughter. She is dead but I hear her voice every day. The voice of my daughter is the voice of children of Gaza. Save the children of Gaza before its last light goes out."

She said she had not watched the film and would not watch it because it was too overwhelming for her to bear. "I wish the children live instead of becoming martyrs," she told the audience.

During the media talk, the director said she was preparing for another film in February 2024 when she heard about the incident. While watching the genocide of Palestinians, she started asking herself questions about the meaning of the art of cinema. "I heard her (Hind's) voice and it stayed with me as if she was asking me to help."

Ben Hania contacted the Red Crescent and they let her hear the complete recording, which she later used in her movie. She said she first thought of making a documentary on it but that would not have the same impact as a feature film. *Al Jazeera* has already made a documentary on the case.

Speaking about her decision to use Hind's actual voice in the film instead of an actor's, she said, "Her voice was alive and it needed to be there. Also, I did not want to show what had happened but I wanted to make people feel. The film is not just about the explanation."

When asked why she chose story of just one child for the film when thousands of others were dying, she replied that one needed a story to understand other stories. "Gaza was asking for help, the story of this one child leads to other stories."

NEWSMAKERS

LONDON: People look out from a rooftop garden in the British capital's business district. In the background are The Shard and Walkie Talkie skyscrapers.—Reuters

LOS ANGELES: A picture of late filmmaker Chadwick Boseman sits next to a pair of shoes after his star was unveiled on the Hollywood Walk of Fame on Thursday.—Reuters

AMRITSAR: A farmer sprays insecticide on a crop in a field on the outskirts of this city in East Punjab.—AFP

PRAS Michel, a member of the 1990s hip-hop group the Fugees, arrives at a court in Washington for his trial on a charge of participation in a campaign finance conspiracy.—AFP

Rapper Pras gets 14 years in jail for role in $1bn scam

WASHINGTON: A US court sentenced rapper Prakazrel Pras Michel to 14 years in prison on Thursday for involvement in a billion-dollar Malaysia scam that funneled money into American politics.

In 2023, the 53-year-old founding member of the 1990s hit trio, the Fugees, was convicted of money laundering and campaign finance violations in a global foreign influence scandal led by Malaysian financier Low Taek Jho.

The scheme funneled millions of dollars into former US president Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign.

A jury had found Michel guilty on 10 criminal counts following a trial that included Hollywood star Leonardo DiCaprio as a witness.

In addition, Michel was found guilty of conspiracy, forgery, and acting as an undisclosed agent of a foreign government.

He was also tried for illegal lobbying on behalf of China in 2017, during the first Trump administration. He intended to request the extradition to Beijing of entrepreneur Guo Wengui, accused of defrauding thousands of investors to the sum of over $1 billion.

Michel's attorney, Peter Zeidenberg, said his client would appeal and that the sentence was lop-sided.

"It is true that Mr Michel was sentenced to 168 months," Zeidenberg said.

"We believe the verdict was unsupported by the evidence and that the sentence is completely disproportional to the facts alleged, particularly when compared to his codefendants."—AFP

COLOMBO: Supporters of Sri Lanka's opposition parties take part in a rally against the government's policies.—AFP

JOHANNESBURG: Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (centre) and South Africa's Higher Education Minister Buti Manamela (centre-right) watch the Umzekelo cultural group perform in the run-up to the G20 summit.—AFP